

Crisis Management in Public Affairs Operations

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Introduction

Public affairs officers (PAO) often receive their sternest test as staff officers in the wake of a crisis. A crisis will bring to light planning processes, the PAO's grasp of regulations and procedures, and the commander's interest level in public affairs operations. The soldiers of our great Army and the citizens of America deserve accurate and timely information during and following crises. Only the thorough planning and execution by the PAO can achieve this lofty objective.

This article provides the PAO with a basis from which to develop a plan for actions during a crisis. This article is not a policy statement and is not designed to contradict any existing policies. Rather, the intent here is to contribute to the planning process of the PAO. (Note: Crisis situations discussed here do not include nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) accidents or incidents. In such situations, consult applicable regulations.)

PAOs must begin the planning process by understanding the possible situations that may be faced. The first section defines the types of possible crises. While the list is not exhaustive, it will assist the PAO in creating a useful and lasting plan. As a foundation for planning, the commander's and PAO's responsibilities must be understood. Craft the planning products for operations after determining responsibilities. Planning requires detailed documents, designs for briefing centers, and escort instructions. The plan must also prepare for actions in a joint environment. Just as importantly, the plan must include clear guidance for individual soldiers and Department of Defense employees. Finally, a crucial element to the planning and execution process is developing products for use in an after-action review (AAR). The AAR is a vital element for shaping future plans for similar situations. PAOs play a critical role in assisting the commander through a crisis. Prepare now.

Types of Crises

Develop crises plans based on a list of possible crisis scenarios. The following list of likely situations will help form the plan:¹

- Bombings
- Land Mine explosion
- Hostage situation
- Kidnappings
- Major weapons theft
- Mass Demonstrations
- Hijackings
- Mail bombs

- Poisonings
- Political assassinations

PAOs should wargame the above situations and insert scenario-specific instructions. Use the planning guide (below) to frame each situation. Identify the potential internal and external agencies involved (i.e., in the case of a kidnapping, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) may assume a large role in executing a law-enforcement action. As PAO ask yourself, -- "Who is the key FBI agent in the area?," "Is a shared public affairs responsibility worth considering?," and "What are the relevant FBI public affairs procedures?" etc.). Conduct a similar effort for each circumstance and attach the response plan as an annex to the base plan.

Commander Responsibilities

Commanders naturally play a major role in addressing a crisis. From the public affairs perspective, the commander can contribute to various community needs. He can ensure the public affairs staff is adequate to the tasks required for crisis management. The installation plan and the PAO SOP are ultimately the commander's product. He must ensure enforcement of its provisions.

The commander should make himself available to the media within the constraints of the crisis management effort. The PAO must guard the commander's time and ensure he is available at the most important times for maximum effect on the community. The commander should also go to locations with large troop concentrations, such as normal formations, to provide assurance and information from "the horse's mouth." In doing so, he will ease fears, quell rumors, and provide useful information to soldiers and their families.

PAO Responsibilities

Early in the crisis, the commander and the PAO should decide where to locate themselves. The PAO should consider if locating closely to the crisis is safe (for the subsequent media attendance) and if it provides adequate access to possible activities. Ensure rapid communication between the PAO and the commander is possible.

The local PAO should issue an initial news release as soon as possible into the crisis situation. Issue the statement using the Associated Press Style Guide, as prescribed in Army Regulation. State the what, when, where, and who (within the framework of proper casualty reporting) of the situation. Alert the media to locations and procedures for media center(s) and briefing times and places if any are planned.

Establish a PAO media field center, (also see Press Briefings below), as near the scene as is reasonably possible. This will reduce transportation needs, limit interference with ongoing safety or law-enforcement activities, and allow quick access to the crisis scene. The field center may be an indoor or outdoor area. If possible, use the area as the press briefing site (see below). Establish a separate press briefing site if necessary.

Discourage interviews with personnel active in crisis management. The guiding principle is to not interfere with the ongoing efforts to resolve the crisis. The PAO, and his staff, must actively gain key information to be relayed to the media.

Protecting classified material. If during the course of events an accident occurs and classified items are put at risk of exposure, use the guidance in **Army Regulation 360-5, Public Information:**

"Inform news media representatives of the presence of exposed classified material which cannot be removed or covered immediately and ask the representatives to cooperate in its protection. Photographers will be informed that violations of the ban against photographing classified material are also violations of Federal criminal laws..."²

Do not "use force" with media refusing to cooperate. Work closely with local law enforcement agencies to protect the materials.

It is a fundamental responsibility of the PAO to communicate with the higher headquarters PAO. Log the communications and maintain a record of conversations, phone calls, e-mail transmissions, and other communications. Provide periodic updates as necessary with the approval of the local commander (or chief of staff as applicable). Include the following information in the initial communications:³

- Crisis specifics.
- Facilities involved.
- Number of personnel involved.
- Number of augmentees deployed.
- Impact assessment.
- Media interest shown.
- Current PAO location.
- Actions taken to date.

Public affairs augmentees may become necessary in a crisis situation. The personnel will likely not have public affairs training. For each of the scenarios considered, formulate a tentative augmentee plan that includes the number, rank(s), and skills required. Ensure the plan calls for an officer or non-commissioned officer (NCO) to serve as an augmentee supervisor. If possible, identify specific units for responsibility and require the units to provide the name of the officer or NCO supervisor and include the units in crises rehearsals.

The augmentees should bring the following equipment, as a minimum:

- Laptop computers with modem and Internet capability.
- Battery-operated AM/FM radio.
- Truck, 2 ½ ton, with driver.

- HMMWVs (Exact number dependent on situation).
- Generator, 110-volt (pulled on trailer). This is for use in establishing remote media or PAO centers.

Planning

Installations normally have a crisis action plan. In addition to the creation of a public affairs SOP for crisis situations, ensure there is a public affairs annex in the installation plan. The annex reflects the SOP but also includes actions required by other installation agencies and interagency cooperative actions.

PAOs must consider a wide range of issues when formulating the public affairs crisis plan:

- **IDs for Public Affairs personnel** - Make special identification cards for public affairs personnel. Put examples of the cards in the installation crisis plan.
 - **Transportation Needs** - Clearly articulate vehicle support required in the plan. Vehicles for consideration include buses, HMMWVs for access to impassable areas, and helicopter lift (as applicable - for public affairs personnel).
 - **Communications Requirements** - Public affairs personnel must have access to the command communication net. PAOs should also have cell phone access. Other communications considerations include phone banks, phone lines for computer access, and fax machines for media.
 - **Rehearsals** - Conduct crisis rehearsals quarterly. If the installation does not conduct routine rehearsals, PAOs must take the lead in scheduling rehearsals for public affairs personnel and other key agencies.
 - **Key community leaders/sites** - Update key community leader communication centers quarterly. If community leaders are willing, include them in rehearsals. List the leaders by name, phone number, function, and location in the plan.
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- **Electronic News Distribution Plan:**
 - **Homepage** - Use the installation homepage to distribute information updates.
 - **E-mail List** - Develop an e-mail list denoting agencies to receive media releases.

- **Commander's Access Cable Channel** - Like the homepage, provide constant updates on the commander's channel.
- **Other Emergency Access Channels** - Provide information as rapidly as possible to regional cable outlets. Many channels and cable companies are interested in providing information updates.
- **Expedient Newspaper** - Depending on the duration of the crisis, consider publishing a special edition newspaper. The newspaper can be one page with the focus entirely on crisis information.
- **Command Information Center** - The center provides information relevant to the crisis for soldiers and their family members. This center is not for the media. Support for the center should come from the PAO, garrison commander's office, military police, and other personnel depending on the nature of the crisis. A senior representative from the PAO's office should serve as the center's coordinator. The center should provide fact sheets, special edition newspapers, automated phone messages with updates and personnel manning phones to answer questions. The center is for information distribution only -- do not establish the center to dispense other services.
- **Media Escorts** - Escort media to crisis sites depending on the nature of the crisis. Escorts can be augmentees, representatives of affected units, or, in specific cases, the PAO. Using PAO assets for escorting can degrade the overall public affairs operation. Escorts should be able to provide the following services for the media:
 - **Brief the Media** - The escorts must know the general situation. They must also know the limits of their expertise.
 - **Protect the Media** - Do not needlessly put the media in harm's way. Media members, especially photographers, will often go to great lengths for a story, ignoring the risk. Do not allow dangerous acts.

- **Protect Classified Material** (see Protecting Classified Material above).
- **Issue Identification** - Provide badges for escorts and media.
- **Coordinate with the Military Police** - Make the military police a part of the plan. Provide briefings and documents ensuring close coordination.
- **Confirm and log entry and exit of media** - Maintain, and keep on record, a log of entries and exits through the media center.

Press Briefings

Conduct press briefings as necessary to consolidate and distribute information to the media. Be conscious of the fact that some members of the media will want "exclusive" information. PAOs cannot become entangled in such efforts. Information releases are for the public -- the news media are merely the conduit through which it passes.

Conspicuously schedule briefings and closely coordinate the agenda for the event. Ensure key briefing personnel are on hand. "Brief the briefers" on a list of potential questions and give the briefers any command messages which were developed. Limit the briefing to no more than 30 minutes. The agenda should include an initial overview, expert-specific briefings, commander input (as necessary), and a brief period for questions and answers. Support the briefings by providing written material to the media with key information.

Room Set-up:

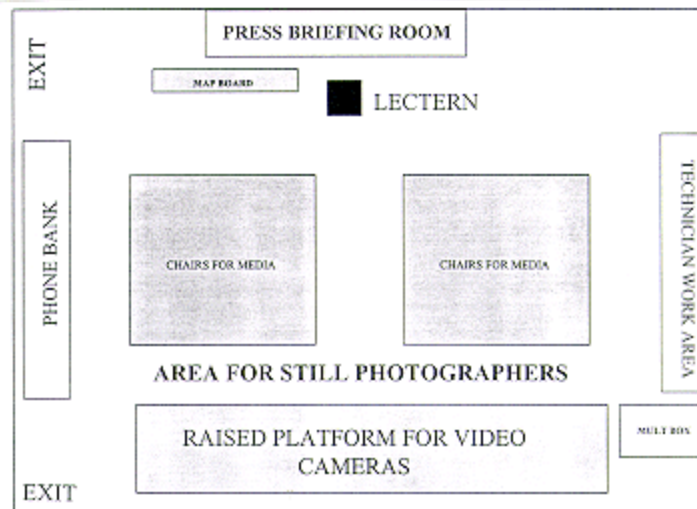


FIGURE 1. Press Briefing Room Layout

Lectern - The lectern should have microphone braces. If possible, put the seal of the parent service on the front of the lectern. Place the American flag and the service flag behind the lectern in plain view of the cameras.

Map Board - Use a map board or other visual devices as necessary. Guard against plastic reflections or complex charts.

MULT-Box - This device allows camera operators to plug into the sound provided by the lectern microphone as a primary source. (MULT refers to the fact that it has multiple ports for hookup). If there is no MULT box, the sound can only be captured from the camera or from an individual line from each camera.

Platform - Build a camera platform that can be moved:

- 2 feet from floor, 6 ft in depth for video cameras
- 2 ½ feet space for each still photographer
- Technician Space
- Folding Chairs
- Work Tables (possibly in another room)
- Phones with outside lines

Joint Environment

Working in a joint environment requires a working knowledge of the policies and procedures of the sister services as well as Joint-specific requirements (not discussed here). Usually, the senior Joint PAO has responsibility for addressing crises in Joint exercises or operations. The following measures may assist PAOs when initiating press releases and making live or taped statements.

- Parent service makes initial announcement if possible. In cases involving one service (in a Joint setting), allow the parent service to make the initial media statement. Clearly this is not always possible. This method is preferable because the parent service understands its own procedures, terms, and missions in a way that may not be possible in the short term for Joint officers of other services.
- Release casualty information according to parent service regulation (attempt to release names simultaneously). If there are casualties, it is always preferable to release a complete list. However, the services vary in their release content relative to casualties.

Technique: In joint settings, create a matrix, based on the service regulations of each service, that specifies the content and conditions for the release of casualty information.

- Confirm the obvious. Example: If a helicopter crashes at an air show, and it is obvious to everyone in attendance, answer media queries as quickly as possible about the obvious facts such as type of aircraft, time of accident, and location of the accident. Do not go beyond what you know to be true. The media will apply great pressure on PAOs to speculate. Do not do it. Delaying or denying obvious information because the aircraft is that of a different service does not serve a purpose. Follow the guidance provided in **FM 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations***:

"...consider the impact that information availability will have on (the) mission, and prepare to address issues openly, honestly and in a timely manner. Once information is available, attempting to deny it or failing to acknowledge it will destroy the Army's credibility."⁴

Individual Guidance

Provide personnel in the command with a guide for use in media encounters. Such items are commonly known as "meet-the-media" cards and can easily be carried by soldiers. Include command messages related to the crises as applicable. Time will not always allow for distribution of the cards -- the commander's and PAO's collective judgment should guide the effort. The meet-the-media card below is based on the card given to soldiers entering training at the National Training Center. Despite the fact that it focuses on meeting the media "on the battlefield," its principles are equally valid in crisis situations:

NTC Reference Guide: Guidelines for Dealing with the Media on the Battlefield ⁵

Guidance extracted from applicable DoD and DA policy:

"Commanders will ensure maximum unrestricted disclosures of unclassified information to news media representative consistent with operational security, guidance from higher headquarters, and the privacy of individuals concerned...."

QUESTIONS TO MAKE YOU A WINNER!

Is the media escorted? If not, ask the reporter to accompany you to the command post or senior NCO or officer and contact higher headquarters.

If you don't escort them, they may not go there and simply wander off to interview someone else.

If the reporter has a media escort from your PAO, you may agree to an interview after the escort has explained some basic ground rules to you.

What do I talk about? Discuss only those things over which you have direct responsibility or personal knowledge.

Do not discuss:

- Political or foreign policy matters.
- Specific operational capabilities or future plans which could be of use to a potential enemy. (Think OPSEC.)
- Classified information.

Do not:

- Allow media to videotape recognizable landmarks nearby, sensitive equipment or inside TOCs.
- Answer speculative questions or give opinions on real or hypothetical ("what if") situations.
- Use the expression "no comment." Say instead, "We do not comment on future operations." "That information is classified." "I'm not qualified to talk about that."
- Lie to the media.
- Make "off-the-record comments." Consider everything you say to a reporter, or in his presence, "On the Record."
- Get angry. If you do, you come off looking bad and so does the Army.

When can I allow an Interview? Do allow interviews with individual soldiers provided that:

- The soldier has no objection.
- He/she is familiar with the area to be discussed and these guidelines.
- An escort is present.

How can I best tell the Army story?

- Relax...be yourself. Imagine the reporter is a close friend and talk as if you were talking to him/her.
- If cameras are present, ignore them and talk directly to the reporter.
- Be brief and concise. Remember, a TV news story will use only a 10- to 15-second answer.
- If you need time to respond, ask the reporter to restate the question. Not for every question, but sometimes it's OK.
- Use simple language, not military jargon. If you must use jargon, explain what it is....Your spouse doesn't always understand you when you talk military.
- Use appropriate posture and gestures. Don't stand at the position of parade rest...that makes you look stiff. Again, relax and be yourself.
- Answer only on question at a time. If you are asked multiple questions, answer the most important one with which you are most comfortable.
- Remove sunglasses if you are being photographed. Audiences can't see your eyes -- you look devious.
- And finally, always make a positive point. This is your opportunity to tell the Army story and what a good story it is.

FIGURE 2. NTC Reference Guide

After-Action Review (AAR)

Write a detailed AAR. Create a narrative, chronologically structured AAR (but do not serve as the operational historian -- that is a job for the unit historian, not the PAO.) The focus of the AAR is on issues related to public affairs activities. Use the following items to construct the review and maintain the raw items in accordance with regulation:

- Public affairs log. This log will capture the chronological list of actions by the PAO (to include all public affairs assets).
- Tapes from press conferences. Include audio and video tapes if possible.
- Press clippings from print sources and video-taped broadcasts from television.

The document must contain problems encountered and lessons learned. Provide a copy of the AAR to the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) (e-mail address call@leavenworth.army.mil) as well as copies of all documentation surrounding the crisis. CALL has the capability of adding such information and documentation to a usable, and, internet-accessible, data base.

Conclusion

Commanders and PAOs play a major role in addressing crises. The commander and PAO have a clear set of responsibilities, each of which is critical to administering the informational needs of soldiers and their families and the surrounding communities. PAOs can plan for crises by crafting thorough plans that address various types of events which lead to a crisis. The PAO plan includes designs for briefing centers, relevant policies, regulations, communications requirements, and news and command information distribution. PAOs will also increasingly operate in Joint environments. An awareness of inter-service regulations and procedures will ensure the public's confidence in the military's handling of crises. PAOs also fully prepare individual soldiers and civilian employees for meeting the media during crises. Key information must be distributed early in a crisis situation. Finally, as with any military activity, PAOs prepare a comprehensive AAR. The AAR is central to continued success in an ever-changing world. New technologies and methods can bolster PAO efforts if properly harnessed. Prepare now for crises. Your command's credibility may depend on it sooner than you think!

1. **Air Force Instruction 35-102, *Crisis Planning, Management and Response*** (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1994), pg. 8. Many of the items on this list originated from this document. Some items have been deleted or renamed. Additionally, new items have been added.

2. **Army Regulation 360-5, *Public Information*** (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1989), pg. 6.

3. **Air Force Instruction 35-102**, pg. 5. This list is largely paraphrased from the AFI. Some of the items, however, have been added to the list and do not appear in the AFI. Many Army MACOMs require specific information in crisis situations. Use the list here only as a guide for planning in the absence of developed guidance. Always consult the local commander or chief of staff before providing staff assessments to higher or other headquarters.

4. **Field Manual 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations*** (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1997), pg. 18.

5. Adapted from the National Training Center (Fort Irwin, CA), **Reference Guide: *Guidelines for Dealing with the Media on the Battlefield***, undated.